

## **Komba: girls' initiation rite and inculturation among the VaRemba of Zimbabwe**

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### *Abstract*

This article seeks to explore the *Komba* traditional rites practised by the VaRemba people of the Shona-Karanga ethnic group in Zimbabwe. The “Komba rite” is intended to move a mature girl (*mhandra*) from the state of girlhood to that of womanhood. It is also meant to initiate *vashenji* (uncircumcised non-VaRemba) women who marry VaRemba men into their female traditions and customs. While Christianity despised this rite as “paganism” and not acceptable to its faith, the VaRemba Christians practise it in good faith. This article will therefore explore the relationship of the Komba ritual to some Catholic Church sacraments. It will attempt to address the problem of whether the rite can be accommodated into Catholic sacraments such as baptism, confirmation and matrimony, and argues for the possible inculturation of the Komba rite.

### **Introduction**

*Komba* is a rite of initiation that is practised by the VaRemba people of Mberengwa, in Southern Zimbabwe. Hannan defines the term *Komba* as *kuibva*, which means “ripe” (Hannan 1961). The VaRemba also refer to their girl initiates as *Komba*, meaning the girl is ripe for initiation into womanhood and marriage. The puberty rite may take to itself overt references to sexual practices. The girls who qualify to go for *Komba* are those who have commenced menstruation. This is an indication that the girl is mature and is capable of getting married and bearing children. A younger girl who has not commenced menstruation cannot attend the ritual but can attend other levels of dance entertainment suitable for her age (Mabuwa 1993:1-2).

The *Komba* rite is regarded as highly esoteric. It is a tribal secret that has been observed across VaRemba generations. Normally adherents are not expected to divulge details of the practice to *vashenji*. Its details are kept secret both from the VaRemba who have not participated in the ritual and to non-VaRemba people. If the initiates are discovered to have shared the esoteric practice then they can be punished by fining them a beast. However due to increasing modernity these norms are not strictly observed. As a result material for this article was obtained by interviewing some VaRemba traditionalists and Christian elders who are open about their culture.

This article will first discuss the origins of the VaRemba people. Next it will explore the *Komba* girls' initiation rite and boys' initiation. Then it will examine the Catholic Church sacraments and pastoral theological implications. Finally it discusses points of significance and possibilities for accommodation.

### **VaRemba origins**

A number of scholars have made contributions about the origins and identity of the VaRemba people. Some prominent scholars include Chigwedere (1982), Beach (1980), Hamond-Tooke (1974), Mabuwa (1993), Mandivenga (1989), Mativha (1992) Von Sicard (1943), Le Roux (1997), and Thompson (1942). The VaRemba, also known as the *Balemba*, *Basena*, *Basoni*, *Vamwenye*, *Lemba*, and *Balepa*, live among other ethnic groups in southern Africa, but consider themselves to be Israelites who after the Babylonian exile migrated to Africa. They are possibly of “African ancestry, as shown by the religious practices like animal sacrifices, ritual slaughter, food taboos, circumcision rites and endogamy” (Le Roux 1997:1).

Mandivenga (1989) tracks the first indications of people in the Zambezi region with Islamic characteristics, now identified as Muslims. He refers to Senor Ferao, Captain of Sena in Mozambique, who in 1810 observed a people in the south-east of Sofala, without names but with cultural

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characteristics that resemble the people now identified as the VaRemba. Features that distinguish them from other peoples are “their abstinence from pork, and rejecting all sorts of meat that is not killed by the hands of their sect. In their habits, customs, languages, superstitions, songs and dances, they imitate the native” (Mandivenga 1989:98).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century the South African Boer trekkers and European adventurers reached the old Mutapa Empire and discovered a number of tribal groups whose habits and customs, especially the draining of blood from the meat animals, were reminiscent of those of Cape Malays. To distinguish these Africans from Hottentots and Coloureds, the South Africans described them as Islamic Kaffirs (Mandivenga 1989:99). By the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was suggested that these “Islamic Africans” comprised members of the broken tribes that flourished among the Shona in Southern Rhodesia and also among the Vhenda, Sotho and Thonga in the Transvaal.

In several ethnographers’ accounts, various groups of the VaRemba people originally constituted one group that eventually dispersed in different directions. As a result, these dispersed groups were identified as *VaRemba* or *VaMwenye* in the then Southern Rhodesia, *Amwenye* in southern Nyasaland and *Malepa*, *Balemba* or simply *Lemba* in the Transvaal of South Africa. Moreover it was also recognised that the “Lemba circumcise their sons, bleed meat animals, and prohibit the consumption of blood, of the flesh of pigs, of any animals not bled to death, and of carnivorous animals. Also they are for the most part endogamous” ((Mandivenga 1989:100).

The VaRemba people give different accounts of their origins. However, most agree that the people of this Semitic culture originally came from Sena in Egypt. Mabuwa said they moved down south, along with their customs and traditions. They travelled through Tanzania, Zanzibar, Kenya, Uganda, Malawi, South Africa and then Zimbabwe. One group, descendants of Rambowani, believe they are part of the group that settled in South Africa. Finally they settled in Mupandashango in the then Belingwe, now Mberengwa, district in southern Zimbabwe (Mabuwa, interview 12/4/2006). By their account, this group of VaRemba settled among the VaSutu people. They are of the totem *Ndou*, which means *Zhou* (elephant) in Karanga, a Shona dialect. This is the language spoken by most VaRemba in Mberengwa. Another related group *Ndhlovu* (elephant) settled in Gutu in Masvingo. This group settled around Dzimbabwe, now Great Zimbabwe ruins. But they are regarded as *Vashenji* because they do not practice circumcision. They have lost their traditional way of life. But the groups or clans that are found in large numbers in the Mposi area are *Seremani*, *Sadiki*, *Duma*, *Hamisi*, *Chinyoka* and *Tavakara* (Mabuwa 1993:7). These names are believed to be a heritage from the dead forefathers and progenitors of the clan. But despite the variations of nomenclature, they share similar customs, traditions and rituals. Apart from these, there are other smaller VaRemba groups in Mberengwa.

One group of the VaRemba people that settled in Mberengwa district at Dubwi under chief Mposi claims to have originated from a place called Gorongoza in the eastern border of Zimbabwe and Mozambique. They have links with the Yao Muslims, known as *Machawa* from Malawi. Their migration was a result of the Shona Ndebele wars during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the attacks by the marauding Ndebele army, *impisi*, they fled to Chishawasha near Harare. But eventually they moved down south and settled in present-day Mberengwa. There they practised their traditions and customs, which include male circumcision and female initiation. However it is outside the scope of this article to deal extensively with the history and origins of the VaRemba. It suffices to select issues that are relevant to our purpose.

## Komba: girls’ initiation rite

**In every Remba village there are some elderly women called Mbuya Nyanye or Chinoni whose role is to teach and initiate young girls into the rite of Komba. There are special qualifications that must be fulfilled in order to enrol for the Komba rite. First, the girl should have reached the menarche: her first**

**menstruation. This is a sign of her maturity and she must therefore be equipped for adult life. Second, the girl must be a virgin. Third, the non-VaRemba girls married into these families are initiated into the culture. In their marital life they are expected to conform to the VaRemba traditions and customs (Mabuwa 1993:12-13).**

In preparation for the ceremony, a girl identifies *the Mbuya Nyanye* of her choice. Then she collects and presents to her a white piece of cloth and bundle of firewood. By this she is accepted and integrated as a member of her family. She is advised to maintain the secrets of the family and all activities that take place from then on. The Komba rite is conducted in bush camps during the months of June to July in winter for two reasons. First, in winter wounds inflicted during the circumcision heal easily with very little bleeding. Second, the initiates are taught to endure the hardships of life, especially when they are made to wake up early in the morning, bathe in cold water, dance or perform rigorous exercises (Musindazi, interview 18/04/2006).

The main teachings of the Komba rite are to help the girls understand the process of menstruation and what it entails in terms of hygiene. Other teachings imparted to VaRemba women include skills of life. Girls are taught the basic roles of a woman in society, such as respect for the husband and in-laws. They are also taught socio-cultural norms that include dating, sexual conduct, self-reliance, brewing beer and ritual ceremonial duties, and the use of African medicines (Mabuwa 1993:16-17).

Menstruation is a sensitive process among the VaRemba. Once the process starts, the initiates are taught to maintain the secret. A menstruating woman undergoes several restrictions in social life. She must abstain from cooking food in the kitchen, brewing beer for ritual purposes, indulging in sexual intercourse, entering a cattle kraal or polishing a hut using cow dung. The same restrictions also apply to a woman who has just given birth. The underlying belief is that menstruation blood or blood at childbirth is “dirty”. The woman is ritually unclean. As Mary Douglas states, “it is matter out of place”. It is not concomitant with the creation of order. A woman’s condition is an anomaly that is “dangerous and polluting” (Douglas 1966:36).

A VaRemba woman is taught household duties. These include preparing and serving food to her husband and family, waking up early, fetching firewood and drawing water from the river, and cultivating the fields. A VaRemba woman is expected to be productive and self sufficient. Laziness is not condoned. When greeting elders, she must kneel or bend her knees as sign of respect. All VaRemba women are given special utensils that become their personal belongings such as plates, cups, mortar and pestle, baskets, four clay pots, “*chirongo* for keeping and carrying water, *shambakodzi* for cooking *sadza* (stiff porridge), *hadyana* for cooking relish and *chipfuko* for keeping traditional beer or (*maheu*) (non alcoholic opaque beer)” (Masarira, interview 2005). The women are taught how to safeguard them and take care of household utensils. Socially, Komba women are encouraged to marry one of their own, normally VaRemba men who have gone through the circumcision rite. A wife is supposed to respect her husband, who is the head of the family. The most intensive teachings pertain to conduct during sex. A Komba girl is expected to be flexible in bed. According to Mabuwa, “Sex in the African culture is expected to be done on a mat and not a bed. Beds are a modern phenomenon. VaRemba dislike them because they do not allow free body movements” (Mabuwa 1993:24-25).

A MuRemba woman is taught the art and splendour of sex. The woman wears attractive beads around her waist, neck and wrist. This is meant to entice the husband into romantic sexual conduct. Beads serve as sexual stimulants, in place of modern kisses. During sexual conduct a MuRemba woman is expected to be sexually active. She has to know the styles of gyration. A woman is taught how to move her waist, for instance, “One is asked to lie on her back looking up, supporting herself by her hand and legs. Directly under her waist is placed some hot ashes, then she is asked to suspend herself so that she won’t be burnt. Sometimes the *Nyanye* uses a needle to prick the Komba’s waist whilst she is lying in the above stated position. All these are methods to teach her move her waist as much as possible. It is a way of giving sexual serves” (*kukoira*) (Mabuwa 1993:25).

The Remba women are taught several rules governing sexual behaviour. They must recite the man’s totem (*chidawo*) during sex to arouse pleasure. A woman is also expected to carry with her small pot or calabash with oil called *chinu*. With this she wipes both her and husband’s organs after sexual contact. She also takes certain medicines to strengthen the man’s virility. In fact every woman is

expected to have a basic medical knowledge of herbs to cure ailments such as headaches, stomach aches, menstrual pains and the like.

The Komba are also taught how to stretch their clitoris. They do this until the clitoris is 5cm long. The long clitoris is meant to hold and direct the penis into the vagina. A MuRemba woman is trained to make her husband reach orgasm within a short time. "She must be able to make sure he is satiated and does not ask for more. In fact it is said that no man who marries a MuRemba woman should ever regret. Sexual life must be sweet at all times without exception. It is believed that no man can ever ask for sex three times a night due to *Remba* women's ability to satisfy their husbands thoroughly" (Mabuwa 1989:25-26). Because of these sexual skills, a lot of *vashenji* men are lured to marry VaRemba women, a practice that has become common in Mberengwa.

Some aspects of the Komba training for girls involve playing songs and dance. These are explicit sexually suggestive songs and dance conducted at night. The procedure starts earlier in the morning when initiates are taken to a river. They are undressed and induced to sing and dance whilst naked. The purpose of the songs and dance is to strengthen the initiates. During the rites, the Remba women observe strict discipline. The *Nyanye* keeps a whip used to beat anyone who displays errant behaviour. Once a girl starts the initiation rite, she is not expected to run away. Failure to comply lends her in serious trouble. If she escapes from the training camp, the parents must pay a fine of a beast as punishment.

The Komba rite reaches its peak in a great ceremonial dance that escorts the initiates back home from the training camp, usually after one or two months of training. The function resembles modern-day wedding ceremonies. The girls' parents are advised of the date and in turn they prepare beer and invite all their kith and kin. "The Komba are made to tie their heads with a red belt across the forehead. This belt symbolizes menstrual blood. They also tie the breasts with a green piece of cloth and wear a short skirt called *mbikiza*. Those who are found virgins cover their faces with a white decorated cloth whilst those who have lost their virginity cover in blue cloth that has a hole in the middle" (Mabuwa 1993:30).

**The procession starts from *Nyanye's* home but she walks behind. The event is marked by singing and dancing. Upon arrival at the homestead, the *Nyanye* hands over the girls to their respective parents. At this stage they stand up and recite their new names that have been adopted at the camp. The Komba tradition requires that a girl changes her name, from the old to the new. New names that may be adopted are Farai (be happy) Piwai (be given) and Fungai (be thoughtful) (Mabuwa 1993:31). The initiates demonstrate some of their performances at the camp. This event brings with it great joy for the girls who have maintained virginity, their parents and would-be spouses. The girls are a source of pride for their conformity to socio-cultural norms. But girls who have lost their virginity suffer great shame, as do their parents, because the girls have violated traditional norms and caused embarrassment. The boys who will marry them pay the in-laws far less *lobola* (dowry) than those who marry a virgin. This celebration marking the initiates' completion of their training is punctuated by singing, dancing, drinking and feasting. The ceremony concludes with the initiates taking vows not to disclose their sacred tradition and teaching, especially to non-VaRemba people, before they finally disperse to their homes.**

At this point we discuss to the VaRemba boys' initiation rite that is held parallel to the girls' rite.

*Murundu*: boys' initiation rite

The initiation for boys, *murundu*, like that of the girls, takes place during the same period in June to July in the cold winter. The boys are summoned during the night and no one is supposed to resist. They are led to a forest in the mountains very far away from the village. Anyone who enquires about them is told that they are "home". It is a time of discretion about their whereabouts.

Foto (1993) has given detailed account of the male circumcision rite in Zimbabwe. The process of circumcision follows a certain pattern. First, the boys are expected to chase and catch wild animals such as rabbits, using traditional weapons such as bows, arrows, spears and knobkerries. They feed on the meat of their catch. They are supposed to get as much food as possible so that it will last the whole period of training. Secondly, the boys dig a hole in the ground and fill it up with water. Then an egg is thrown into the water by the instructor and the initiates must compete to take the egg from the pit. They do so in turns and a boy who fails the exercise is disqualified from proceeding with the ritual. He is considered as still too young and needing time to mature before returning to do the same process at some other time. Thirdly, the

**boys are taught how to build makeshift huts that resemble the homes that they will live in during adult life. This teaches the boys to be productive and to be supportive of their families. Finally they undergo circumcision (Foto 1992:21).**

Explaining the male circumcision rite, Foto (1992) states that circumcision takes place on a rock called *tlaba*, using a razor or knife. After the operation a boy is led to the river where he is helped to stand in the cold water. This cold water helps to relieve the pain. Normally all circumcisions are completed before sunrise. If there are too many boys, the rite can take two to three days. This circumcision is the final separation from the attributes of youth (Foto 1992:21). After the process, each boy is covered with a special leather “skirt” called *motsabelo*. These are worn in order to protect the wound against flies and heat from the sun that may cause pain. But severe pain is neutralised by use of antibiotics. The boys spend the whole day in a special position lying on their backs. During this time of healing, the boys are taught traditional history, culture and songs. After their recovery they are taught the traditional education, various skills of hunting, dancing and war. They are made to compete in these exercises. After this they discard their old names and adopt new ones such as *Thlaisi*, *Chavani*, *Tsamisi*, and *Mukachana*. Any one who calls them by their old name is punished severely by the *ihosi* (chief), who is considered as the tribal father (Foto 1992:21).

At the end of the circumcision rite, the ceremony to bring back home the initiates is held. It is organised in such way that it does not clash with that of the girls, which is held separately but at the same time of the year. The ceremony is led by the instructors, who inform the *zvikonzi* (chief’s messengers), who will, in turn notify the *ihosi* to prepare for the returning boys. The *ihosi* will then invite his people to prepare millet beer for the occasion in honour of the initiates.

## Catholic sacraments

The Catholic church teaches seven articles of faith as Christian sacraments. These are Baptism, Confirmation, Matrimony, Eucharist, Orders, Penance and Sacrament of the Sick. The sacraments are divided into three categories: sacraments of Christian initiation, which are Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist; Sacraments of ecclesial service or social sacraments, namely Orders and Matrimony; and medicinal sacraments, which include Penance and Sacrament of the Sick (Foto 1992:26).

Colonnell (1939) defines a sacrament as follows; “The term sacrament is derived from a Latin noun *sacramentum*” (Colonnell 1939:1). Originally it referred to the ancient Roman custom of making an oath of allegiance. A soldier was to take his “sacrament” or vow of allegiance to pledge his services to the Roman Empire (Bausch 1977:3). However, the use and meaning of sacrament has modified over the years. The Catholic Church believes all sacraments were instituted by Christ. They believe God acts in the sacraments, through Christ and his Spirit, revealing and giving himself.

### *Baptism*

The sacrament of baptism is also called the “sacrament of faith” and of configuration to Christ in his ecclesial body. Baptism is a central theme of the New Testament. There are several references to baptism in the Gospels, Acts of the Apostles and the Pauline corpus. In Pauline theology, baptism becomes a participation in the passion, suffering and death of Christ in order to rise with him (Foto 1992:29).

Baptism is considered as putting off the old man and putting on the new (Col 3:9). This is shown in the undressing before entering baptismal water and dressing afterwards in a white robe. Baptism is an external sign and means of man’s rebirth to the supernatural and day-to-day life. It is the first and fundamental sacrament of the new allegiance, the beginning of a mature way of Christian life. It was instituted by Jesus’ own baptism and conferred upon missionaries in the mandate to “go and baptise” (Mt. 28:27). Thus baptism is a change of allegiance, as Paul said: “We are no longer slaves to sin but now slaves to God” (Rom. 6). This is the new era that water brings (Foto 1992:29).

The matter of baptism is water and the form is the Trinitarian formula. This matter and form are accompanied by a series of rites that prepare and explain the symbol and its efficacy. Baptism also involves choice. This is shown in the baptismal ritual when the neophyte is asked if he accepts or not. The answer is usually in the affirmative, “Yes” uttered by either the adult or his/her guardian in the case of an infant. By this baptism incorporates one into the Christian community. Consent and consciousness make a sacrament valid. But there have been ecclesial problems on infant baptism. Whilst adult express consent on baptism, the parents or guardians give their consent on behalf of the

children. Critics see this as limiting freedom of choice and infringing on human rights. However, parents and guardians have the duty to bring their children up and provide for them not only physically but morally and religiously.

### *Confirmation*

In the Catholic Church, confirmation is intricately connected to baptism. This is done at the age of 12 years, when the candidates are prepared to receive the sacrament. Here they learn about their responsible role in the church and the future. At this stage they are introduced to real-life issues such as marriage. Catholics regard it as the Pentecostal gift of the Spirit given to every Christian. It gives and reveals one's responsible role in the mystery of the church and its mission of evangelisation. The Vatican II says, "By the sacrament of confirmation they (the baptized) are more perfectly bound to the church and are endowed with the special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed (Flannery 1977). Confirmation does not add something completely new to the baptised but it intensifies the baptismal commitment. The maturity of baptism is completed by confirmation.

### *Matrimony*

The Catholic Church practices matrimony as a sacrament in accordance with the Old Testament doctrine that states that man and woman were created in the image of God, thus putting them in a relationship of fundamental equality between them (Gen. 2:23). They are called to participate in the creative action of God. Marriage enables a contract between two families as well as two individuals. The two constitute a unity. Husband, wife and children form a "trinity". Marriage is something sacred and inviolable and is very important to the contracting parties and society.

### **Pastoral theological implications**

The Christian missionary approach has been that of confrontation and ridicule of African traditional religion and custom, describing them as "pagan", "primitive" and "inferior". But in the history of the Catholic Church, the Vatican II advocated dialogue with different cultures, dialogue with other non-Christian religions (Plennary 1977).

### *Positive views of Komba*

The Catholics express some positive views about Komba. The rite has been viewed as a way of offering education for young people. "This ritual provides education and introduces the youths to adulthood and enables them to face the realities of life. Through Komba ritual the youths are made acceptable to the community" (Jane Mbirimi, interview 20/2/2005). It is also believed that through the rite the children gain knowledge of the history origins of the tribe, language and culture. They also receive sex education that helps them stabilise their families. As a result there are few cases of divorce in communities that practice the rite. Mahoso states, "Adultery is rare and prostitution only crept in as a recent occurrence" (Fortune Mahoso, interview 21/06/2006).

The Komba rite serves to pass on tradition from one generation to the next. It expresses a people's culture and so preserves the people's tradition. As a social event, the Komba rite can be compared to the biblical Old Testament circumcision rite. According to Genesis, God entered into a contractual relationship with Israel and circumcision was to be the mark of this bond. In that way Komba ritual is used to express the VaRemba religious beliefs.

In this light we can discern some possibilities of accommodating the Komba rite into Catholic rituals. However there are some negative aspects that have been identified in the Komba rite.

### *Negative aspects*

The VaRemba identify some negative aspects of Komba rite. First the rite is associated with intimidation and there are certain fears that are associated with the practice. According to Hama, "If someone fails to perform Komba he or she is considered 'deviant' and suffers some misfortunes. Komba is not done out of free will. Young people are forced to undertake this exercise. This is a violation of human rights" (Chengeto Hama, interview 12/01/2006).

There are certain rules and prohibitions that undermine the conduct of the rite. This has created problems, especially in the educational sector, not only between the VaRemba Catholics but also the

Lutheran Church, which runs most schools in the area. For instance, Komba initiates are compelled to suspend formal education at schools such as Chegato, Ruzengwe, Lutheran strongholds and Catholic Don Bosco, during the Komba season. VaRemba insist on kosher killing of beasts for consumption in the dining hall at Chegato in order to suit their own children. VaRemba students boycott some school sessions and functions during the Komba camp period. This infuriates the school authorities. Most girls are not even allowed to attend school for fear that education would teach them to be promiscuous. In order to circumvent the bad influence of formal education, some children are sent to Komba rites under age. They are exposed to the rigours of the rite prematurely. The exercises can deform their bodies. Some girls even lose their virginity in this way (Musindazi, interview 12/01/2006). Some analysts do not agree with these fears, but others hold that “Komba rites breed promiscuity and lesbianism. The boys are [subjected] to acts of masturbation that [are] considered sin in Catholic teachings” (Fr Munyongani, interview 26/02/2006). Moreover, Catholics also condemn genital mutilation. It maims and brings pain to the initiate. The instruments used for circumcision such as razor blades and knives are not treated and therefore are a potential cause of disease (Foto 1992:46).

From a Catholic point of view, the Komba rite is a “closed” practice. “The church can not get vocations to priesthood, brotherhood and sisterhood from Komba-initiated youths. This is the case because the youngsters are trained for married life. This is contrary to the Latin Church law espoused by Catholics that stipulates that its ministers remain celibate so that they may give themselves fully to the services of God and his people, without the responsibility of having to look after and provide for wife and children. Those in the orders are bishops, priests and deacons” (Code of Canon Law 1983:181). (However, of late allegations of homosexuality and lesbianism have been associated with some members of the Catholic orders in Zimbabwe, a subject that lies outside the scope this article.)

### **Significance of Komba**

As pointed out by Van Gennep (1960), elaborated on by Victor Turner (1969), the Komba rite consists of a threefold structure of rites of passage consisting of a pre-liminal phase (separation); a liminal phase (transition); and a post-liminal phase (re-incorporation). Separation is attained when the girls leave home for the bush camps. The initiation rite in the camp enables initiates to enter a state of liminality before they are re-incorporated into the society through the home-bringing ceremony marked by music, dance and feasting, at which the initiates graduate as adults into Remba tradition and culture.

Similarly, all three Catholic sacraments: baptism, confirmation and matrimony, represent the same three stages of separation, liminality and re-integration. With baptism, separation is realised when the novices are isolated from their previous lives by the use of symbols and symbolic actions. At the liminal stage they are brought as novices by their parents or guardians to a place apart, where they are taught the Christian faith. Then they are brought back to the Christian community through baptism. “They receive garments, new names, especially new status” (Foto 1992:34). They abandon their ‘pagan’ name and pick up a Christian name, normally the name of a saint who is believed to protect and intercede for the person against all evil.

Confirmation is closely connected with baptism. Just like baptism, it follows a pattern of separation when the candidates prepare for the sacrament through catechism. Confirmation is the sacrament of maturity and commitment. The boy or girl becomes mature after confirmation but does not adopt a new name. Matrimony makes the two people ‘one’. At this stage they undergo special instruction on real-life situations. They are taught how to keep, love and how to behave as married persons.

In all the sacraments, the novices undergo a process of life death and rebirth. “The deep lesson in all this is that humans mature by dying in all previous state. In order to do this, they must enter into an unknown state of fear, ordeal, growth and choice until finally reborn” (RCIA 1991:8). Through the sacraments, the Catholic Church has been able to carry human beings right through life from childhood, adulthood to old age and illness and death to the life to come. Jesus instituted the sacraments as a way of addressing human beings’ real life.

### **Possible accommodation of Komba**

The Catholic church advocates the study and evangelisation of all cultures. Several Catholic theologians have contributed material that supports the accommodation of different cultures. Pope Paul IV proclaimed, “The Kingdom which the Gospel proclaims is lived by men who are profoundly linked to a culture and the building up of the kingdom cannot avoid borrowing the elements of human cultures” (Pope Paul IV 1979:19). The Catholic Father has an open policy towards the world cultures. Cardinal Malula of Zaire, cited by Rweyemanu, said, “Yesterday foreign missionaries evangelized

Africa, today the Christians of Africa are called upon to evangelize Christianity” (Rweyemanu 1985:342). Father Ignatius Zvarevashe argues, “If Christianity does not blend with non-Christian religious elements and assume them, it remains foreign on the surface of the receiving cultures” (Zvarevashe 1985:10).

However, the Catholic church is cautious about the process of inculturation and gives advice, The Komba instructors should avoid those parts of ritual which bring about maiming or the killing of a human person. Perhaps the Catholic Church may take time with Komba trainers on retreats and associate them with structures such as the “Children of Mary” in order to reflect on these practices in the light of the Gospel. Both sides can share mutually. In that way it is possible to accommodate Komba rite in the church. The church should be rooted in the people’s culture, to give it an indigenous expression and “soul” so that it becomes part and parcel of the VaRemba Catholic faith (Foto 1992:49).

However, there are problems that may emerge in the process of accommodation. Traditionally the church is renowned for resisting change. It has taken very long time over the task of de-Latinising itself. The church is also affected by aspects of racism and ethnocentricism and a disdain for other people’s traditions and cultures. Whilst the VaRemba culture is conservative and secretive, the Catholic church has propagated a gospel of superiority that has led to divergent approaches to religion. Naturally it is difficult to break away from tradition, yet the church is called upon to do so. But it needs men and women of great vision to extricate the church from its traditional burdens of segregation and allow for “incorporation” for the greater glory of God. From the look of things there is no harm in accommodating the Komba rite. What is needed is to pay heed to the negative elements embedded in the rite. Alternatively, Komba could be canonised just as other rites have been, such as *kurova guva* (bringing-home ritual) by the commission of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops’ Conference.

### **Summary and conclusions**

This article discussed the origins of the VaRemba people, and explored the Komba girls’ initiation rite (and boys’ initiation). It examined the Catholic church’s sacraments and pastoral theological implications. Finally it examined points of significance and possibilities for accommodation of the Komba rite in association with the church sacraments.

The article has shown that main thrust of the Komba ritual is to prepare the girl initiate for the roles she is expected to undertake in society. The preparation includes teachings on discipline, self-reliance, proper behaviour to husband and in-laws, good sexual conduct, menstrual care, and skills of life such as cooking food and beer, pottery and handwork. The rite features as a traditional rite aimed at exposing marriageable girls to the challenges of marriage and the responsibilities that go with it.

The Komba ritual plays a very important role for the VaRemba people. The rite enables the VaRemba girls to partake in the social, political and judicial activities of their tribe. The rite gives them status in society. Thus the rite becomes an inescapable “event” in the life of a MuRemba person in Mberengwa. Komba is basically a socially oriented ritual rather than a religious one. There may be some religious aspects to the rite, but the Remba do not seem to be conscious of the religiousness of the ritual. Komba’s main thrust is societal issues, integration and uniformity in the society achieved through assuring the same rules and roles for all the Remba wives.

Inculturation of the Komba rite in Catholic sacraments is possible because the traditional rite shares some features with Catholic sacraments. The VaRemba people are tolerant of Christianity and most practise the new religion alongside their tradition and culture. There appears no vast distinction between the Komba rite and Catholic sacraments. It would be possible too for the Catholic Church to employ “cultural *Kenosis*” (emptying of a culture) in order to inculturate into the traditional people’s culture”.

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